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ABSTRACT

Research into professional decisionmaking indicates that judgments tend not to be made on a rational, systematic basis, but are often formed rapidly and intuitively, from a limited set of cues. This study addresses the issue of if and how teachers assess the literacy competencies of young children prior to starting formal schooling. Seven Reception teachers from four primary schools in England were asked to make literacy predictions for the incoming cohort of children. Data are presented based on interviews with the teachers, completion of baseline literacy assessments, and the scrutiny of daily reading records. The study explores the factors which influence teacher predictions for 30 children, including 17 for whom literacy success was predicted and 13 for whom literacy difficulties were anticipated. The study shows that teachers do indeed form early judgments about children based on pragmatic factors, with a strong link between teacher predictions and families' socioeconomic status. Importantly, initial representations of children as "likely to fail" tend to become more permanent over time, whilst teachers also tended to provide less support for children expected to perform poorly. Implications for professionals are highlighted in relation to the Code of Practice. (Contains 62 references and 4 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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by

Anthony Feiler and Alec Webster

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference
(University of York, September 11-14,1997)

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Teacher Predictions of Young Children's Literacy Success or Failure in Four Primary Schools

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Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference
(September 11-14 1997: University of York)

Abstract

Research into professional decision-making indicates that judgements tend not to be made on a rational, systematic basis, but are often formed rapidly and intuitively, from a limited set of cues. This study addresses the issue of whether and how teachers assess the literacy competencies of young children prior to starting formal schooling. Seven Reception teachers from four primary schools were asked to make literacy predictions for the incoming cohort of children. Data are presented based on interviews with the teachers, completion of baseline literacy assessments, and the scrutiny of daily reading records. The study explores the factors which influence teacher predictions for 30 children, including 17 for whom literacy success was predicted and 13 for whom literacy difficulties were anticipated. The study shows that teachers do indeed form early judgements about children based on pragmatic factors, with a strong link between teacher predictions and families' socioeconomic status. Importantly, initial representations of children as "likely to fail" tend to become more permanent over time, whilst teachers also tended to provide less support for children expected to perform poorly. Implications for professionals are highlighted in relation to the Code of Practice (DFE, 1994).

Suggested key terms: emergent literacy; reading failure; Reception children's reading; teacher expectation

Introduction

There has been considerable research interest over the last decade on formative pre-school factors associated with later success in reading and spelling (Schneider, 1993). Much of this work, particularly studies carried out by experimental psychologists, is concerned with the pre-requisite cognitive skills of early literacy, such as phonological awareness (Wagner and Torgesen, 1987; Rego and Bryant, 1993), memory capacity (Gathercole and Baddeley, 1994), or knowledge of the writing system, eg letter-phoneme mappings (Lundberg and Hoien, 1991). Early interactive experiences of spoken and written language are also important in determining which children will acquire greater expertise faster across a wide range of school-related activities (Raban, 1991). A body of international research shows that later success in reading and writing is influenced by what children already know or have

experienced in written language before school entry (Clay, 1979; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1984). Isolating those cognitive and interactive factors which are predictive of later school progress in literacy may thus lead to the early identification of learning difficulties and the provision of effective intervention programmes.

Bases for teachers' judgements and decision-making

The potential importance of longitudinal surveys of predictor skill variables and family literacy experiences for both entry screening and instructional practice is not in question. However, what has not been sufficiently considered are the processes by which evidence, objective or subjective, is gathered to make predictions about children likely to succeed or fail with literacy, how teachers weigh up families' potential for supporting literacy development at home, and the factors which teachers attend to in planning early intervention.

Research in a number of fields where expectations are formed and professional judgements made suggests that professionals tend to base their judgements and decision-making on judicious hunches rather than objective information (Dawes, 1982; Dowie and Elstein, 1988). Rather than planning interventions on a rational, systematic basis, assessments are often made rapidly and intuitively, influenced by a circumscribed set of cues (Ross and Anderson, 1982). Bias and misjudgement may arise because information which is confirmatory of an initial hypothesis tends to be more salient than evidence which is contradictory (Jennings et al, 1982; Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Arkes, 1986).

Social class and family background variables

Social class and family background variables feature prominently in emergent literacy research. The links between parental occupation, income or educational history and children's achievements, have been addressed in numerous studies (Chall et al, 1990; Sammons and Mortimore, 1990; Purves and Elley, 1994). One of the main findings to emerge from this work is that there are wide variations, *irrespective of social class*, in relation to children's early literacy experiences. The importance of specific factors in family environments has been demonstrated in studies where parental interest, modelling, positive attitudes and verbal engagement with children are identified as strong predictors of school success, regardless of social class or educational levels achieved by the parents (Clark, 1976; Moon and Wells, 1979; Rowe, 1991). Heath and Thomas's (1984) account of a 16-year-old black mother reading with her two children shows that aspects of interactive dialogue around books can be present in family contexts shown to be severely disadvantaged. However, little research has so far addressed the issue of whether teachers are more influenced by perceived social class stereotypes, such as home address or parental occupation, rather than family-specific strategies, as they make literacy predictions about children.

Family environments vary widely in the status and value accorded to books, the presence of writing materials and other written resources, time spent reading or writing (by adults and children), and the quality of interactions between adults and children around print. Summaries of research evidence from family literacy projects have shown clear correlations between children's reading progress and factors such as public library loans, book ownership,

and the modelling of literacy usage by parents in writing notes and lists, or using reading to find information, for example, in newspapers or environmental print (Wolfendale and Topping, 1996). In her study of New York children Durkin (1966) found that early readers tended to come from homes with more pencils, paper and books, and have mothers who read more often than average, who read frequently to their children, and helped out with children's spelling and word recognition. Data collected as part of the Bristol Language Development Study highlighted the importance of reading stories aloud, buying comics, pens, paper and visiting libraries (Wells, 1985).

Emergent literacy and the present study

The relationship between children's cognitive skills, family literacy and school entry throws up intriguing questions. We know that some teachers pay little attention to children's previous experiences of reading when planning teaching: the five-year-old in Baker and Raban's (1991) study was introduced to a letter- and word-focused programme despite her existing reading fluency. Further, some infant teachers say they dislike teaching children who already read on entry because they have to rethink their class planning or role (Wortley, 1991). Important questions therefore arise in relation to teachers exercising professional judgements about young children and their families. In particular, how teachers' informal hypotheses are constructed about pre-school children's potential for literacy development, and how such expectations might shape teachers' dealings with children (and families) over time.

In this paper we address the issue of how teachers assess the competencies of young children (about to start formal schooling) in relation to important cognitive precursors of early literacy. One purpose of the study was to examine whether teachers made judgements about Reception children's literacy skills before the children themselves were encountered. Further objectives of the study include how judgements were formed; whether or not the teachers' predictions about literacy outcomes were accurate; and whether or not the teachers provided additional support for children expected to experience difficulties with reading and writing. This research is part of a programme of work conducted at the Centre for Literacy Studies at Bristol University, which is examining the use made of literacy in social contexts, such as the family or classroom. Reported here are data from the stages of research which documented the progress of Reception children from four primary schools as they started school.

Methodology

Four primary schools from two Local Education Authorities were selected on the basis that their catchment areas covered a range of social backgrounds. Another criterion was that one of the authors had previous contact with the Headteachers of the schools (the author concerned had developed contacts through continuing professional development in two of the schools; and through the supervision of teacher education students in the other two). Asking Reception teachers to make predictions about literacy success or failure for young children is a sensitive area, and teachers' involvement in such an investigation depends on trust in the investigator and support from the Headteacher. In this respect previous professional contact with Headteachers was an important factor when permission to proceed with the study was being negotiated.

There were three stages in this phase of the study - see Table 1.

Table 1 The three research stages of this study

Stage 1	Teacher literacy predictions for Reception cohorts in four primary schools, before school entry (July 1994).
Stage 2	Baseline literacy assessments, and recording of teacher and parent reading diary entries (autumn term, 1994).
Stage 3	Revised teacher literacy predictions after one term in school (December 1994).

Stage 1: During the summer term of 1994, Reception teachers from seven primary schools were interviewed. They were asked to consider the likely literacy performance of the incoming cohort of children due to start in September 1994, and to predict which children might do better than average with literacy by the end of the Reception year, and which children might do worse than average. A weighting scale was used to gauge the extent to which the teachers' impressions were based on direct knowledge of the child (arising, for example, from observations of the children during summer term visits); direct knowledge of the parent/s or older sibling/s; indirect knowledge of the child, parent/s or older sibling/s; and any other information.

Stage 2: During the autumn term, 1994, records were kept of school/home reading diaries for the two cohorts of children. It was anticipated that the teachers might direct additional help at children expected to struggle with reading and writing, as the Code of Practice on special needs (DFE, 1994) emphasises the importance of early identification and intervention. However aspects of the literature on teacher expectation suggest a counter-intuitive hypothesis, and that the opposite may occur - ie that low-expectation children might receive less curriculum coverage and that some teachers will be generally less supportive towards low expectation children (Brophy and Good, 1974; Blatchford, 1989). In a comprehensive review of teacher expectation research Good (1987) notes that pupils believed to be less capable have less opportunity to perform publicly, especially on meaningful tasks; less opportunity to think and analyse (as much work set for low expectation pupils is aimed at practice); less choice on curriculum assignments (more opportunity to work on drill-like assignments); less autonomy (frequent teacher monitoring of work and frequent interruptions); less opportunity for self-evaluation; and less honest/more gratuitous/less contingent feedback.

Stage 3: Revised predictions of literacy outcomes were sought after the children had been in school for one term in order to explore whether the teachers' expectations altered after sustained contact with children. The literature on clinical decision-making suggests that this would not necessarily be the case - professionals can be relatively unaffected by new information when making clinical judgements (Elstein and Bordage, 1979). Once opinions have been formed, evidence has to be strongly disconfirming in order for initial viewpoints to be revised.

At the end of the Reception year (July 1995) the teachers were interviewed about planning decisions made during the year for the LDP children - this phase of the research will be reported at a later stage.

Findings

Literacy predictions in July 1994 (before school entry): Out of a total of 66 Reception children in the four schools, the teachers identified 17 LSP children (literacy success predicted) and 13 LDP children (literacy difficulties predicted). These 30 children formed the two cohorts tracked in this research.

Weighting of factors: The factor *direct knowledge of the child* was generally weighted more heavily by the teachers when making literacy predictions than the other four factors (direct knowledge of sibling/s, indirect knowledge of the child, parent/s or siblings) ($p < .05$, Wilcoxon signed ranks test for all but one of the sixteen comparisons for LSP and LDP children, in July and December 1994). *Direct knowledge of the parent/s* was weighted more than other factors for six out of the eight comparisons for LSP children in July and December 1994 (Wilcoxon signed ranks test, $p < .05$). For LDP children direct knowledge of the parent/s was significantly more weighted than the other factors for three out of the eight comparisons in July and December 1994 (Wilcoxon signed ranks test, $p < .05$).

In summary, the teachers tended to base their predictions more on direct knowledge of the child (for example, a child may have been observed turning the pages of a book, or using writing materials during a pre-school visit) than on other factors. There was also a tendency (but less strong) for teachers to base their predictions on direct knowledge of the parent/s, for example from interviews, contact with parents during pre-school visits, or contacts relating to siblings.

Prediction confidence: The teachers' prediction confidence was assessed by means of a 7-point weighting scale. For the LSP children there was not a significant increase in prediction confidence from July to December 1994, ie after the children had been in school for one term (Wilcoxon signed ranks test, $p > 0.5$). The teachers were as confident in July 1994 before the children started school as they were in December 1994. For the LDP children, however, the teachers were significantly more confident in their predictions in December 1994 than in July 1994 (Wilcoxon signed ranks test, $p < 0.5$). In other words, there was some evidence that judgements about children predicted to experience literacy difficulties tended to become more firmly fixed over time; whilst judgements remained more open or fluid for children expected to succeed.

Themes identified in teachers' comments - July 1994 predictions: When predictions were made in July 1994, teachers were asked to give reasons for predicting either literacy success or literacy difficulties. These were noted during interviews. Themes which were articulated by more than one of the seven teachers have been listed in Table 2 (LSP children - literacy success predicted) and Table 3 (LDP children - literacy difficulties predicted).

Table 2: LSP predictions (literacy success predicted), July 1994 - themes which were articulated by more than one of the seven teachers

THEMES	NUMBER OF TEACHERS COMMENTING ON THEME	EXAMPLES (DIRECT QUOTES FROM TEACHERS) - OBLIQUE LINES INDICATE QUOTES ABOUT DIFFERENT CHILDREN FROM DIFFERENT TEACHERS
Child's interest/skill in reading/writing	4	Have seen X turn the pages of books and turn books the right way/Aware of what a book is about/Seemed to have good manipulative skills
Parent/s supportive of literacy and/or parent/s articulate	4	A positive, cooperative parent/Both parents are supportive and have good spoken language skills/Articulate parents...they come into school, and read a lot to the children/mother articulate and seemed sensible
Child's good spoken language skill	3	Has good oral skills/Very articulate/can talk in a mature way
Sibling's academic competence	3	Brother picked things up quickly/Older brother very able and reads very well
Child's determination	2	She'll come with quite an impact... I sense a sort of "get up and go" - a determination

Table 3: LDP predictions (literacy difficulties predicted), July 1994 - themes which were articulated by more than one of the seven teachers.

THEMES	NUMBER OF TEACHERS COMMENTING ON THEME	EXAMPLES (DIRECT QUOTES FROM TEACHERS) - OBLIQUE LINES INDICATE QUOTES ABOUT DIFFERENT CHILDREN FROM DIFFERENT TEACHERS
Child's unsettled behaviour/poor concentration	5	Will not speak or give eye-contact/Very short attention span...fiddles with everything/Has shouted at the Welfare Assistant/Total lack of confidence and general disorientation in the classroom
Child's lack of interest/skill in reading/writing (noted during pre-September class visits)	4	Coloured in, but no idea what letters were/Does not have a great interest in books and stories/Couldn't pick up a pencil, tell a story or name any colours/His drawings were just scribbles, he had a strange pencil grip

Changes in teacher predictions from July 1994 to December 1994: Overall the predictions remained largely the same from July 1994 to December 1994. Out of 30 children, there were 6 changes (ie, 80% remained in the same category):

3 changes to LSP group - one to "average"; two to "below average"
3 changes to LDP group - one to "above average"; two to "average"

New predictions in December 1994: Overall 9 new children were added:

To LSP group - 3 (by two teachers)
To LDP group - 6 (by two teachers)

The new predictions were weighted overwhelmingly on "Direct contact with the child" for changed and new predictions for both LSP and LDP children. Median weightings were either 5 or 6, indicating that the predictions were based "almost totally" or "totally" on direct contact with the child.

Themes identified in teachers's comments - December 1994 predictions: The themes which were articulated by more than one of the seven teachers in December 1994 when predicting literacy success included: the child's interest/skill in reading/writing, and parental support (both mentioned by 5 teachers); and the child's general confidence/enthusiasm/concentration (mentioned by 3 teachers). For LDP children: lack of parental support (noted by 6 teachers) and the child's lack of interest/skill in reading/writing (mentioned by 3 teachers).

Changes "down" - changed predictions in December 1994 from literacy success to average or literacy difficulties predicted, and new children in LDP category: There were three changed LSP predictions in December 1994 (out of a total of 17 in July 1994). These were made by a single teacher - one to average and two to literacy difficulties predicted. Six new LDP children were added by two teachers. The themes articulated for both changed predictions (ie from LSP to average or to LDP) and for new LDP children concerned either the child's lack of skill in phonics or word recognition skills; or poor concentration (both themes mentioned by two teachers).

Changes "up" - changed predictions in December 1994 from LDP to "average" or literacy success predicted, and new LSP children: There were three changed LDP predictions in December 1994, made by two teachers - two to "average" and one to literacy success predicted. Three new LSP children were also identified by two teachers. The themes which were articulated by teachers either for changes in LDP predictions or when new LSP children were identified included the child's skill in phonics and the presence of supportive parents (each mentioned by one teacher). However the theme that was mentioned by three of the teachers when changes "up" were discussed was the child's general enthusiasm for learning, mentioned by 3 teachers.

Entry assessment data: A literacy assessment checklist was developed, founded on a literacy baseline tool devised by one of the LEAs serving two of the schools. This contained items such as: Can the child listen to a story lasting 5-10 minutes? Can the child demonstrate that we read words not pictures? Can the child consistently recognise his/her own name? How many letters can the child name/sound?

The total possible score on the literacy assessment checklist was 34:

LSP children median score: 24
LDP children median score: 9

LSP children scored significantly higher than LDP children on the entry assessment questionnaire (Mann Whitney U test, $p < .005$).

Literacy prediction and socioeconomic background: As an indicator of socioeconomic status, data on eligibility for free school lunches was obtained for the 30 children. Parents can claim free school lunches if they receive "income support" - a means tested benefit for those who are unemployed (or working for a maximum of 16 hours per week) or for sick or single parents.

LSP children - 1 out of 17 claiming free school lunches.
LDP children - 6 out of 13 claiming free school lunches.

Reading record entries: The reading records used in the reception classes (adopted "naturally" by all four schools) indicate how often each child is read to, or engages in "shared reading" with an adult in school or at home (at school teachers or classroom assistants sign the record each time this occurs; similarly parents are asked to sign when their child reads, or when they read to their child). Table 4 shows the median reading record entries for LSP and LDP children during the autumn term 1994.

Table 4: Median school and parent reading record entries by month for LSP and LDP children

	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
LSP CHILDREN: MEDIAN SCHOOL ENTRIES	17	13	19	6
LDP CHILDREN: MEDIAN SCHOOL ENTRIES	11	11	16	4
LSP CHILDREN: MEDIAN PARENT ENTRIES	13	10	18	2
LDP CHILDREN: MEDIAN PARENT ENTRIES	4	4	4	1

There is a consistent trend for LSP children to have more median teacher and parent entries than LDP children for the four months of the autumn term.

Combined teacher and parent entries in the reading record: Initially the raw data for combined teacher and parent reading record entries were analysed. Data for one of the 13 LDP children was excluded as the child only attended for two months of the autumn term so raw data were incomplete. For combined teacher and parent raw data reading record entries during the autumn term, LSP children had significantly more entries than LDP children (Mann Whitney U, two tailed test, $p < .01$).

Teacher entries raw data: There were more teacher entries in the reading records for LSP than for LDP children (Mann Whitney U test, two tailed test, $p < .05$).

Teacher entries - adjusted data: In order to control for any differences in attendance between LSP and LDP children, the school reading record entries were adjusted. Again there were more teacher entries for LSP than for LDP children ((Mann Whitney U test, two tailed test, $p < .05$).

Parent entries: There were more LSP parent entries than LDP parent entries (Mann Whitney U one tailed test, $p < .01$).

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers made judgements about children on a range of social and behavioural cues and that these predictions were closely associated with the socio-economic status of the families involved as measured by eligibility for free school meals. This is not to say that the teachers drew directly on this data, but that they were sensitive to cultural differences between families and may have made certain assumptions, for example about parental support. The children predicted to do well scored more highly on the baseline entry test and continued to receive more help than LDP children both at home and in school as reflected in reading record entries. The data suggest that teachers may change their minds about children in the light of experience such as evidence of general enthusiasm or slow skill development. However, the increase in teacher confidence about judgements of LDP children indicates the possibility of self-fulfilling prophecies for this group.

Discussion

One of factors that prompted this study was to find out if teachers made predictions about literacy outcomes for children before they started school. If so, how did teachers make such judgements about children's literary capabilities, how well did they make them, and did such judgements affect the support provided by the teacher over the year?

Do teachers make predictions?

The results from this project indicate that the Reception teachers from the four schools made predictions about literacy from a very early stage, even before the children had started formal schooling, utilising a range of cue sources. That teachers make judgements about literacy outcomes is not surprising. A growing literature on professional decision-making suggests that professionals such as doctors, judges and teachers frequently have to make forecasts of the likelihood of uncertain events - involving large elements of intuition and educated guesswork (Shavelson and Stern, 1981; Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Katz, 1988). However what is notable is that the teachers were prepared to make literacy predictions after relatively little direct contact with the child, before school entry.

Turning to the teachers' confidence in their predictions, for LSP children the teachers were just as confident in their predictions about literacy success before the children had started school as they were after teaching the children for three months. For LDP children, however,

the teachers' judgements became more established - after one term the teachers were more confident about predicting literacy difficulties for this cohort. High confidence is a common feature of professional judgement (Kahneman et al, 1982; Fischhoff, 1986). Furthermore, there is evidence that we tend to cling on to our original perceptions despite the existence of contradictory evidence (Elstein and Bordage, 1979). One explanation (for the significant increase in the teachers' confidence when predicting literacy difficulties in December) is that the teachers' initial formulations were correct, despite their impressionistic and superficial basis. A more likely interpretation is that the original representations, particularly of anticipated "problem children", tended to become fixed over time.

How the judgements were formed

For LSP children in both July 1994 and December 1994 teachers tended to base their predictions on direct knowledge of the child and direct knowledge of parent/s. In July 1994 for LSP children there was a relatively broad range of themes mentioned by two or more teachers during interviews. Three of these were child-related: good spoken language skills; interest/skill in reading/writing; and the child's determination. One theme was sibling-related: good academic performance by an older sibling; and one theme centred on a good level of support offered by parent/s, linked with the extent to which parents were perceived as being articulate.

For LDP children the most influential factor when literacy predictions were made was direct knowledge of the child in both July and December 1994; and the range of themes mentioned by teachers in July 1994 was relatively narrow. Only two themes were referred to by more than one teacher: poor behaviour/concentration; and the child's lack of interest in reading/writing. By December the theme of the LDP children's lack of interest/skill in reading/writing was still present (mentioned by three teachers). However the theme of lack of parental support was strongly present. This was mentioned by six out of the seven teachers as a reason for the teachers' continued prediction of literacy failure.

So for LDP children, apart from the teachers' evaluation that the child lacked interest/skill in reading/writing, the other key issues that resulted in literacy difficulties being forecast were poor behaviour/concentration during pre-school visits, and a perceived lack of parental support (both before school entry and after one term in school).

Changes in prediction category

A general principle that has been identified in the literature on professional decision-making is that early hypotheses bias the interpretation of information collected later. We are inclined to discount data that disconfirms our original hypotheses (Arkes, 1986). In view of this it is interesting to review the reasons given by teachers for changing their minds about predicting literacy success and literacy difficulties. What does it take for teachers to change their minds about literacy prediction?

In December, for changes "down" (where teachers changed their predictions of literacy success to average or below, and where teachers added new LDP children) there were two themes mentioned by two or more teachers: the children's lack of interest/skill in

reading/writing, and the child's poor concentration. For changes "up" (where teachers changed LDP children to average or above, and added new LSP children) the theme that predominated was the child's enthusiasm/desire to learn.

Thus the themes most frequently articulated when teachers changed their views either "up" or "down" were child-related. This contrasts with the theme mentioned most often by the teachers when giving reasons for their continued prediction of literacy difficulties in December 1994 - which was lack of parental support.

Baseline differences between LSP and LDP children and reading record analysis

The entry assessment results show a marked difference in performance - LSP children's scores were substantially higher than those of the LDP cohort. This result suggests that the teachers' initial assessments of Reception children's potential for literacy development were fairly accurate. But did the teachers act on their "hunches" and ensure that weaker children read more in school? Results from the analysis of the children's reading records during the first term indicate that the opposite occurred. For all four months (September to December) there was a consistent and significant trend for the school entries and home entries to be higher for LSP children than for LDP children.

It is difficult to tease out cause from effect in this finding. Did the LDP children's actual poor literacy competence result in a tendency for the teachers not to hear LDP children read as often as LSP children? Or did the teachers' literacy predictions affect the amount of reading time given in school, leading to poor progress in children who may otherwise have become competent? Alternatively, did the low rate of parental entries in the reading records for LDP children in some way reduce the number of times teachers heard the children read at school? Whatever the processes involved, the inescapable fact is that in this study LDP children started their literacy career at school with a double disadvantage. Not only was a literacy outcome of failure predicted by teachers before the children started school, but by the end of their first term the number of times these children were heard reading, or were read to both at school and at home was significantly less than for LSP children.

During the final phase of data collection for this study, measures will be taken of the children's literacy development at the end of the Reception Year.

Literacy prediction and social background

The social background data is pronounced. Only one of the parents of the 17 LSP children claimed free school lunches, compared to 6 of the 13 LDP children. How did teachers judge home background factors when making predictions? Did they make intuitive judgements about "class"; or did they focus on the extent to which parent/s might become actively involved in developing children's reading and writing skills, regardless of the family's socioeconomic status? When the teachers' comments are analysed for themes in July 1994, occasionally reference is made to parental behaviour that is directly supportive of literacy, eg:

> *Articulate parents...they come into school and read a lot to the children.*

However the majority of teachers' July 1994 comments about parental support are general in nature, and refer to secondary parental features - ie features which the teachers seem to assume are in some way connected with literacy development, eg:

> *They spend time with the children...they are very arty and creative parents/She is a positive, co-operative parent/Both parents are supportive, and have good spoken language skills.*

These comments suggest that teachers made assumptions about parental support for literacy based on factors such as the parents' verbal skill/fluency, and home address (one teacher explained that she makes "sociological judgements" of children's literacy potential based on where the child lives). Some authors have cautioned that there are wide variations between families from low socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of home support for literacy (Teale, 1986). The most important factors may not be social class, but *how* parents rear their children, eg do they read to their children, listen to their children read, take them to the library, or help them with school work (White, 1982; Rowe 1991).

Conclusions

This study has shown that even before children start school, teachers have already started to make judgements about literacy outcomes. When children are perceived to be potential "failures", these judgements may become more firm over time and be difficult to modify. Such evaluations are based on a range of factors. Although teachers place much weight on individual children's response to reading/writing tasks when making such judgements, another factor that emerged strongly when predicting literacy outcomes was the teachers' assessment of parental support. A general tendency noted in the literature is for teachers to provide less support for children expected to perform poorly. This trend was evident in the present study, despite the strong emphasis in the UK on the importance of early identification and intervention for children with special needs (DFE, 1994; OFSTED, 1996).

Should we be critical of teachers' tendency to make literacy predictions? Is there a danger that such a tendency can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies? Or should we pay more attention to such predictions so that future literacy failure may be avoided by targeting support at children at risk of failure? During the final phase of this study, the seven teachers were interviewed at the end of the Reception year to establish whether support had been subsequently directed to the more vulnerable group of children predicted to fail with literacy. The findings from the final stage of the research will be reported at a later stage.

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